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Balance

In my school, classes were designed for forty children. The forty-first had to drag a chair from class to class. I looked Jewish, so I was designated the forty-first. My chair had three legs and such a jagged edge that it could saw wood. It sawed through my thick yellow tights.

Oksana from the first desk was the only one in the class who spoke to me that year. In the morning, she greeted me with "Hi, Tramp," and after classes, she said goodbye with "Bye, Tramp." My parents rarely whipped me, but my classmates did often. Back then, I realized that to sit on a three-legged chair, you needed perseverance and balance.

Here are a few simple exercises for self-soothing that can help reduce stress:

- 1. Find a quiet place: Sit or stand somewhere where you won't be disturbed.*
- 2. Deep breathing: Close your eyes and take a deep breath through your nose for 4 seconds, hold your breath for 4 seconds, and then slowly exhale through your mouth for 6 seconds.*
- 3. Repeating calming phrases: Repeat phrases to yourself like 'I am calm,' 'Everything will be fine,' or 'I can handle this.'*

In the eighth grade my role as the class victim was exhausted, they wanted fresh meat. Then a red-haired girl in glasses transferred to our class. For three days the class watched her voraciously, waiting. It became clear that I would no longer be tormented. On the third day Kolya approached Redhead at break, carefully removed her glasses, dropped them on the floor, and stepped on them. The class held their breath. The

bright autumn sun shone through the large school windows. Redhead stood by the overturned desk, looking around with surprise, annoyingly sniffing in the silence. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath through my nose, and counted to four. I opened my eyes. Kolya smacked her on the head, and blood trickled from her nose.

I was packing my notebooks into my backpack in the next row. Oksana from the first desk suddenly caught my eye and whispered, "What kind of beer do you drink?" A class gap opened up on the patch of linoleum between me and Redhead. This could be it, live and enjoy. I glanced at Redhead smearing blood on her tear-stained snout, and at the gleeful Oksana, and mentally repeated twice, "I am calm," "Everything is going to be fine". But nothing changed around me – Redhead sniffled, the class laughed even louder. I got up and smacked Kolya on the back from behind with my three-legged chair.

Of course, we both got the shit beaten out of us. Later we left school together; outside the gates Redhead stopped, fumbled in her bag and silently handed me a Snickers bar.

After graduation, Redhead and I didn't cross paths, but we liked each other's photos on Instagram. Sometimes she commented on my photo "Such a beauty!" Then I would write in response, "Queen!".

Ten years later, the full-scale war began. On the second day, I opened Instagram and saw Redhead in uniform holding a gun. She stood in a concrete basement, dirty and disheveled. I turned on a new spotless white kettle via Bluetooth in the kitchen, and poured Chinese fermented tea into a clay teapot. My house gleams; there are comfy blankets everywhere. And a cat. And designer lighting. And a home office in a separate room so I didn't have to leave the house so often. All my life was well-planned on a board, hanging on the wall. I plucked the stickers one by one. First, the interview for a new German project, then the meeting at the embassy, then the trip. I grabbed all the stickers, made a ball out of them, and threw it into the trash. I drank tea, wrote to Redhead in a DM, and mobilized.

- 1. Body scan: Start from your head and slowly move down to your toes, paying attention to each part of your body. Relax your muscles if you feel any tension.*

2. *Visualization: Imagine a place where you feel calm and happy. This could be a beach, a forest, or any other place. Focus on the details: sounds, smells, colors.*
 3. *Gentle stretching: Perform a few light stretching exercises to release physical tension from your body.*
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Do you hear something swishing? Swish-swish, swish-swish. It sounds like a dense bag. Then a hard thud, like a tree trunk dropped on the ground. Or maybe it's a heavy "plop," like leftover jelly meat plopping into the dog bowl.

Bags are important. The first one was Vasyl, we packed him in 120-liter black household garbage bags. One for the head, one for the legs, and then wrapped with tape. But it's not the best option in summer. Vasyl had suffered a direct hit from a 120 mm mine, so he was one large piece and many small ones. By the time he reached the interim morgue, he had already started leaking. Imagine the inconvenience. You pick him up, and he falls apart, percolating on your boots. The smell gives you a headache; the boots are ruined now. New boots cost at least 200 dollars. Vasyl in life was a scoundrel; he always bummed cigarettes off everyone but never bought any, saying he was quitting. And now, even in death, he's a hassle. And you sort of understand that Vasyl doesn't do it on purpose, but you're still a little mad at him.

So we got special thick bags from the morgue. They feel like supple packages from the postal service. Soldiers send gifts to their children for their birthdays and then return home in the same plastic after death.

These bags didn't tear as easily and were more convenient to pack, but they still leaked. Puddles would form by the morgue while we unloaded. To pack people, you need perseverance.

At first, the smell bothers you, even makes your mind drift. For reasons unknown, the small bags are especially unpleasant.

One time, arriving at a village near the front line with walking wounded where there's a collection point for corpses. It's summer, thirty degrees heat, and the air STINKS. One run-down house is the point for corpses, the other is where the orderlies live. On the fence between the houses an old bed

sheet hangs, constantly sprayed with chlorine. It helps about as much as a chastity belt on a prom queen.

I had dropped off the wounded for further evacuation, and then I spot a real barbeque in the undertakers' backyard with something grilling on it. The senior medic said to me:

- When was the last time you ate?
- I don't remember.
- How about some crab salad and chicken wings? With honey sauce!

I follow him, dig into a bowl of salad, devour the wings rabidly. And leave behind two packs of cigarettes in exchange.

Grounding Technique

- 1. Sit or stand comfortably: Find a place where you can settle in comfort.*
- 2. Use your five senses: Name five things you can see, four things you can touch, three things you can hear, two things you can smell, and one thing you can taste.*

NOTE: These exercises are designed to help you keep calm.

To serve in the army, you need to maintain your balance. In the first year of service, I bought ears for my helmet and a Pokémon sleeping bag liner. Redhead laughed at me when she came to visit me for a coffee. By the second year, I stopped being embarrassed to sleep with a soft toy. My mom sent me a toy badger from home. His name was Phil, and when he got a little dirty I would wash him when I had the chance and dry him in the sun. The village where we lived was three kilometers from the zero line. I washed Phil, placed him on the roof of the cellar in the yard, and sat with the fighters, the four of us by the house. Spartacus is washing dishes in a basin; the rest are smoking. Suddenly, something big splashes to the left! Then to the right, something splashes again! Then left and right again, splish-splash! And it is getting fucking closer. Everyone scrambles into the house, slams against the walls and falls. I am lying there and regretting that the cellar is far far away, and we can't reach it now. The shells are whistling and splashing. We wait. Then Vasyl barks from the bush outside by the wall:

- You fuckers voted for this in 2019 when you elected your beloved president!

Spartacus roars back from the corridor:

- Your scumbag was even worse

The sergeant shouts:

- Shut up, both of you, morons!

Then a whistle, and boom! A powerful hit nearby. The surface shakes and clangs; debris from the ceiling falls onto my head.

The air is full of dust so are my eyes, the window is gone. I try to clear my eyes. A shout from the yard, I run there, and there's a big crater where the cellar and Phil used to be.

Spartacus bought me a new unfamiliar badger. I politely put it by the bed. Then it disappeared forever into the bottom of my bag, along with broken flashlights and packs of wet wipes.

A week later, some signalmen moved into the abandoned house next door, climbed onto the roof to lay their mysterious wires, and found my Phil! He was almost intact, just missing his back leg.

To retrieve bodies, it's essential to have a supply of plastic stretchers, but original stretchers are expensive. Even the volunteer-made ones are often slapdash and hard to come by. We had a fighter, Maksymka, thirty years old, who loved TikTok and his grandmother who raised him. He called her almost every day. Once, during an assault, he took a captive and was starting to tie him up when all of a sudden there's a hit. Direct hit from a tank, right on them. It was hectic, and no solid stretchers, and our troops retreated. It wasn't until two weeks later that we had access to that trench again. Clearly, we can't reassemble Maksymka, but DNA analysis requires a piece with a big bone because the flesh decays, but bone marrow remains. So away he goes, Spartacus, the squad leader, on the next sortie, bringing a good new bag, an industrial mask with a filter, and rubber gloves. As he started searching for Maksymka in the pile of meat, serious shelling began. Russian and Ukrainian body parts intermingled so thoroughly that he struggled to find a leg, stuffed it into a bag, tied it to the stretchers, and dragged it like a

sledge. He crawled and ran, falling face-first by the stretcher, and finally he made it out. The boys picked him up, took him to a proper morgue in the city, signed the papers, handed over the leg, and now we are smoking by the entrance. I am arguing with the orderly who is trying to snag our expensive stretchers. Everyone keeps their distance from Spartacus who is a little splattered.

The medic comes out and barks:

- Are you all fucking nuts?

We freeze for a moment. I ask him:

- What happened?
- Why the fuck did you bring me a katsap?
- How could he be a katsap if he's our Maksym?

So we follow him into the morgue, through a door draped with a wet cloth into the dissection room. There, on the table, lies a leg with Russian camouflage leftovers with a typical kirza boot marked "Made in Russia." I have no words, I just look at Spartacus. Gradually turning red from the neck up he shouts:

- So my dumbass dragged a Katsap three kilometers?!

Spartacus had to go back for Maksymka again. So off he went to the woods, where he finds the shelling is even more intense than before. He barely made it back. Maksymka's bag was torn in two places. I look. It's a small bag. So I ask him:

- What did you bring?
- An arm.
- Not another mix-up?

The platoon leader emerges, removes a camouflage net from the pickup, to drive to the city. He sees Spartacus and smirks, a cigarette trembling on his lip. Spartacus says:

- Get the fuck out, it's definitely Maksymka. He's wearing the watch we gave him for his birthday. With the inscription 'Good luck'.

And he waves the bag at me. With the arm. And the stench is so bad that dead beetles fell from the trees.

Coming to the city is always a celebration. There are shops, pharmacies, and the post office, and people in strange colorful clothes. You can sit at a table, have a large latte with a croissant, grab some shawarma, and hang out with girls. In the city, there is always a rented apartment where you can wash your clothes and take a shower. Also, valuable items like laptops, spare uniforms, Iowa boots that cost a fortune, and good alcohol are stored here. All the things that won't be destroyed by a random hit on the dugout. In the city, you can find sex, drugs, cream-filled pastries, buy fake military gear in a military store, and get a haircut.

Once, Spartacus and I arrived in Kostiantynivka, we are standing at the market picking some vegetables and there's a call. I look at the phone: it's Redhead's mother, Natalia Ivanivna.

- Hello, Nastya? Nastya, hello. Nastya? Nastya, can you hear me? Hello!
- Hello, I can hear you.

I say while squeezing a tomato. The tomato is slightly soft to the touch. But not too soft. Just as it should be. I'd probably been eating nothing but porridge with sandwiches for two weeks.

- Nastya, hello. Where are you? Why is it so noisy?
- I'm at the market.
- You're at the market while my daughter is dying in a trench??
- She's not dying

I say as I approach the grapes. The grapes glisten with a golden shine right in my eyes.

- Tell me now! You dragged my daughter into this! And now you're at the market while she's dying in a trench!

I reluctantly pull away from the grapes and open Instagram. As expected, Redhead has a new post. In the photo, she's in full gear, with dirt smeared across her face. If you look closer, you can see finger tracks. She's holding a rifle without a magazine and a training grenade. The caption reads: "We're being stormed, but we're not giving up." The background is blurred, but I recognize the medics' yard by the shape of the

garden beds of dill, and the nice brick outhouse. It's about twelve kilometers away from the first trenches.

- She's at the medical point; I just saw her.
- I can't reach her! If she bleeds out there alone, without any help, it will be all your fault!
- Natalia Ivanivna, I'll ask her to call you right now.

I buy five kilograms of grapes and five kilograms of tomatoes. I wipe a large pink tomato on my T-shirt and bite into it. The juice runs down my hands, dripping onto the ground. It tastes just like I imagined. Spartacus drives us to the apartment, but I don't want to go inside. So I sit on the bench by the entrance, eating tomatoes from the bag. I eat the second one, then the third. The sun is warm. I sit there, imagining how we're going to take a shower and change into clean clothes. I message Redhead that her mom called again. Redhead responds with a drunken voice message:

- Nastya, he doesn't loooove meee. Can you believe it?! He doesn't loooove me, he said soooo.

I grab a fourth tomato, dreaming about how I'll go on leave, visit Natalia Ivanivna, ask for tea, and while she's putting the kettle on, I'll erase my number from her phone.

Spartacus comes out of the entrance wearing nothing but turquoise shorts, holding cigarettes and a phone.

- So your girlfriend is at war.
- Am I cursed today?!
- Vityka told me that in the first company yesterday, old man Ivan almost kicked the bucket; they took him to the hospital at the last moment. After the hit, he had a concussion and a through-and-through wound in his arm, right here, where the bicep is.

He shows me his bicep, the size of a globe. He points with a cigarette to where the old man's wound was.

- Well, your girlfriend bandaged him up and sent him back. But the old man complains that he's having trouble breathing. And he can't dig. The sergeant tells him, 'Well, what do you expect, Grandpa? At your age, it's enough to breathe.' The next day, the old man turned a bit blue, and they took him to the city. It turned out he

had a hole in his armpit, and one lung collapsed. Your friend Redhead wrinkled her nose at Grandpa's hairy armpits and didn't touch them. Imagine.

I received the next batch of bags from the morgue. The boxes were labeled "UN Aid to the People of Ukraine." They gave us lots of bags, more than there were soldiers in my company, including me. I smoked, thought about it, and stashed half of them in the warehouse. But what to do with the rest? I took them to the chief medic.

Our chief medic was hitting the bottle hard, like a dog drinking cold water. When his deputy was hit by rockets, the chief medic drank for three months and one day. The next day, I came by.

In the medics' yard, the grass is trampled, cigarette butts everywhere. An ambulance with open doors stands by the house, and an unfamiliar soldier lies on a stretcher beside it, his face the color of a cheap church candle. Two feet away, the driver smokes a cigarette, staring at the ground. I go inside. In the corner on a stretcher, the chief medic snores, the room reeks of alcohol.

- Redhead, who's the man in the hallway?

Redhead, with freshly washed hair, sits at a large worn table. She looks up from her laptop and stares at my dirty uniform and grimy nails.

- Stroke,- she replied, annoyed.

She has a beautiful new plate carrier, with a Snickers bar peeking out of the middle pouch.

- Why aren't you leaving?

- We are waiting for the commander to sign the report.

- Won't he die?

- Shouldn't do.

Redhead finishes clicking, grabs her e-cigarette from the charger, and steps outside. Ten seconds later she rushes back,

disheveled, grabs a medic's bag, and runs out. From the outside I hear her yelling:

- He is breathing, just wheezing!

The ambulance backs out of the gate and leaves.

I go outside, planning to use their toilet and clean up. Their toilet is fancy – a stool with a hole cutout standing over the pit. In the corner, there are various wet wipes because medics always have loads of volunteer supplies. I pull down my pants, lift my shirt, grab a big green pack of wipes with incomprehensible Polish words, and begin to clean myself eagerly. In the distance, I hear an outgoing "boom." Automatically I count, and at five, something lands not far off. I run a wipe between my legs, it BURNS, I freeze and look at the pack. It says "antibacterial". I curse, grab another pack with a baby picture on it, and quickly start wiping off the alcohol. The baby on the pack smiles at me, and it feels derisive. How it burned. I hear shells hitting the village. It burns as if I had sat directly on the hot summer sand missing the towel at the beach. I grab more wipes while trying to pull on my pants. Another hit lands closer, I jerk, my foot slips somewhere, I get tangled in my pants, and fall chin-first onto the makeshift toilet seat. My ears ring as I fly out the outhouse door.

The chief medic smokes on the bench near the house, watching me with a dull gaze.

I hear someone shouting behind the gate. Vasyl runs in:

- They've hit the medics!

I turn around and run after him, hearing the heavy breathing of the chief medic behind me. We run between houses, through gardens. Two streets away, I see a crater from a shell and a burnt overturned ambulance. From behind it others are dragging a body with half a head. The chief medic runs to the body, examines it, and shouts:

- Dead.

Someone shouts into the radio. I look at the Snickers bar in the plate carrier. I don't look at the head. The sergeant drives up in our medical pickup with new stretchers. I open

the trunk, take out a box labeled "UN Aid to the People of Ukraine." The guys packs Redhead into a high-quality bag, and I zip it up. We strap her onto the stretcher like a cocoon.

Method 5-4-3-2-1

1. *Five things you see: Look around and name five things you can see.*
2. *Four things you can touch: Touch four different objects and feel their texture.*
3. *Three things you hear: Listen and name three sounds you can hear.*
4. *Two things you can smell: Identify two smells around you.*
5. *One thing you can taste: Focus on one taste in your mouth or imagine tasting something.*

This technique helps you to distract yourself from stress and return to the present moment.

The sergeant pats me on the back:

- Oi, don't sleep! Get in the back. Don't forget the stretchers – bring them back!

The guys load two bodies and one wounded into the truck with me. I recognize the sick man from the ambulance; his leg is broken. The wounded man screams as I apply a tourniquet and check him over.

We arrive at the morgue drop-off near the funeral home. They take the wounded, and carry the bodies into the house. I look for room on the floor to put mine down, but the entire floor is already packed with bags. A familiar orderly stands nearby:

- It's been a while since we had a 'bus', and it's been two days of assaults. They should start picking up by evening.

I find a spot in the hallway. I search the bodies, take Redhead's phone out of her pocket, the screen lights up, showing a photo of her and her sister. I get her ID, take off her rings. Her hands are soft and warm. Almost clean.

I stand up, thinking I needed to bring the stretchers back. I look at the concrete floor. How can I leave her on the concrete? Especially with such warm hands.

I turn around and leave.

Bee Breathing Technique

1. **Sit comfortably:** Find a place where you can sit straight.
2. **Close your eyes:** Close your eyes to focus.
3. **Close your ears:** Place your index fingers on your ears to reduce external noise.
4. **Breathe deeply:** Take a deep breath through your nose.
5. **Breath out with an "m-m-m" sound:** While breathing out make an even, low toned "m-m-m" sound like a bee.

I was not allowed to go to Redhead's funeral; we're always short of people.

I sent one-legged badger Phil to my mom by post, in a supple plastic bag. Let him return home. I know he's tired.